

PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN AND TELEVISION: FAMILY MEDIATION

Sara Pereira

Child Studies Institute

Minho University – Braga, Portugal

Conceptual Framework

Traditionally the family was seen as the main socialising agent. The child learned rules and behaviour patterns within the family environment. Nowadays, despite developing an important role in the socialisation process, it is complemented by other institutions. At three years of age, or even less, a child enters upon a new social life in a different context - the kindergarten. The child interacts with other children of the same age, develops communicational skills and knowledge, and develops her/him self as an individual and social human being.

It is in this period of socialisation that she/he develops a growing interest in television. Like family and kindergarten, television contributes and has an active intervention in the child socialisation process. It is an important learning source and a special form of contact with the world.

As Dorr (1986) concluded, we believe that children are a special audience. They have cognitive and communicational skills. They should be conceived as having an active role in the construction and interpretation of messages that are received. But they can not prescind from mediation processes developed by their parents.

Research has exceeded the model of the immediate media effects but it remains present in the mass media discourse. Television is frequently accused of all the evil matters of the world: the ruin of family dialogue and life, the suggestion of violent behaviour in younger generations, an obstacle to the occurrence of other activities seen as more important and fruitful, the development of passive attitudes and behaviour, etc. We agree that the media, especially television, has a strong influence in consumers. But we also believe that this influence can be understood within a larger and more complex framework of lifestyles and social relations of individuals and groups. Nowadays, research has as a starting point that which Schramm (1961) believed in: as important as questioning ourselves about television's influence on people, is questioning how they use it.

Television casting is responsible for the construction of meanings, but not all television programmes influence children in the same way. Understanding television messages is a different process from children to children, as well as the conditions of television reception. We can consider the influence of different aspects: age, family environment, children's psychological abilities, their emotional and intellectual development, their social life, their schooling environment, the rural or urban areas where they live (cf. Chalvon et al., 1991; Mariet, 1989; Lazar; Chevallier et al., 1991). The possibility of interpreting what children watch (or don't watch) on television can influence the way children understand what they watch and its meanings.

Several researchers (Chevallier, Souchon, Lazar, St. Peters, Huston and others) agree that the way children watch television is influenced by family environment. Parents can influence the way children watch television and the learning process that is developed from these experiences. As Chevallier considered (1991:245) *"(...) the parents role and the family environment are conceived nowadays as an essential dimension in the study of children and television relationship"*.

One of the main progresses in audience studies [such us studies that has been done by James Lull, David Morley, Thomas Lindlof and Roger Silverstone], is the recognition of the importance of study and analysis of the reception context: the family environment¹.

We agree that there is a relation between family and television, as shown by different research developed in recent years in England, the United States of America, France and Mexico. We also consider that television programmes have a strong relation with family life and its daily organisation.

Numerous research carried out in different countries shows the importance of the direct interaction between children and adults. If parents discuss, comment and help children to interpret the television programmes, they can help the children to understand its contents.

¹ Different sociological researches mention that this institution presents in our days a multiform reality. It has been influenced by significant changes related with several factors: professional occupation developed outside home (from man and woman), kind and area of residence, living conditions in urban areas, families with less children, etc. Also, childhood (which is, with family, the second framework dimensions of this research) is usually faced as homogeneous and universal category: all children have the same life stage even living in different places of the world. But is it also a social and historical construction, as Philippe Ariés showed before. We consider that children should be conceived as a differentiate social group, that reflects social structures and practices and, at the same time, that can be seen as an active agent in social life.

Mediation Concept

We consider mediation based on situations of interaction. In general terms, in this research, the concept is understood **as the process in which parents and significant adults help children to decode and comprehend the complexities of the physical and social environment**. The main aim is to enable children to understand the world considering their developmental stages. We believe that mediation can be seen as a way of 'building bridges' between what children know and new information available that need to be understood and structured.

The mediation processes promote the child's knowledge and learning. It depends not only on the role of the child, but also on the resources and supports of people with whom she/he interacts, their social context and the cultural practices of the world to which she/he belongs.

It is essential to recognise that there are differences in the mediation process developed by parents belonging to different cultures. For instance, families differ in relation to symbolic and material resources and their uses according to their social positions.

With regard to television, the mediation concept can present several frameworks:

Desmond et al. (1985:463) believe that mediation represents an active effort from parents or others, to decode the complexities of the physical and social world, including television, in terms of being understood by children considering their developmental stages.

Bryce and Leichter (1983:310) agree that mediation can be conceived as the *"(...) processes by which families (or other institutions) filter the educational influences, protect, interpret, criticise, reinforce, complement, refute, react and transform"*.

Corder-Bolz (1980) uses this concept in terms of explicit verbal mediation (from adults to children), which is considered one of the existing mediation forms that can occur within families. The author thinks that parents and significant adults may influence learning that children develop by watching television, by talking about and commenting on the subject of the programme.

Our interpretation of the concept of mediation is the same as that shared by Desmond et al. and Bryce and Leichter. We agree that mediation is the process by which parents (and other significant adults) help children to filter, confront, interpret and give meaning to different contents transmitted by media. It also involves direct or indirect strategies of restriction and control of children's television experiences.

We consider that when confronted with perceptions and interpretations of the messages transmitted, children can develop active critical skills related to television. It is a structuring process of child's television experiences.

Mediation Forms of Television

In literature we can identify three different television mediation forms developed by families:

1. **Restrictive mediation:** occurs when parents control children's television experiences. The time of watching and the programme content is limited by parents. It involves the implementation and execution of rules to children's television experiences.
2. **Evaluative mediation:** this form of mediation occurs when parents and children watch television with an aim. They discuss and interpret the programmes with children. This type of mediation provides children with a critical comprehension of television.
3. **No focalised or indirect mediation:** it includes opinions and attitudes of parents related to television and the general comments on specific programmes. It is the form of mediation that is developed by observation. It does not require the parent's involvement and it happens casually, not deliberately. Some research indicates that a significant number of watching experiences involve this kind of mediation.

By analysing these three forms of mediation, we believe that the restrictive and the evaluative ones are **direct mediation forms**. These situations involve the deliberate intervention of parents (or other persons who are developing mediation). The no focalised is an **indirect mediation form**. But direct mediation forms do not necessarily mean **active mediation**. This requires an explicit intention, a strategy to discuss, to explain and to

interpret the content of television programmes. It implies involvement, participation and for much of the time, watching television together.

Watching television with children provides more opportunities to discuss and to confront perceptions. It is also an opportunity to explain what is happening. Sometimes it also involves comments and the arising of questions.

Both forms of mediation - the direct and the indirect - are important and influence children's television experiences, as most authors consider. But different authors believe that active mediation, the direct and intentional forms of interaction, are more important in the mediation process. These forms are more effective in the way children interpret and understand the television messages. It influences the learning opportunities that are developed by children when they watch television. When mediation is directly and deliberately implemented, it is more effective.

The Research

Based on several presumptions, we have developed research on the processes of family interaction and mediation with television. Specifically, we wanted to examine the television experiences of children from 3 to 6 years old, and the mediation processes developed by parents. The subject and the aims of this research were the data collection, experiences and opinions from parents who had children from 3 to 6 years old, or, when that was not possible, the opinions from significant adults in the lives of these children.

We interviewed a group of 50 families from different social contexts and geographic areas of Braga, a Northern Portuguese town. To comprehend the data collected, we selected the qualitative content analysis based on a set of thematic categories shown in the table below (in this paper we only discuss and present conclusions belonging to the third thematic category – television mediation processes developed by the families).

This research is based on the possibility of the existence of different forms of mediation. We consider that the aspects mentioned are influenced and conditioned by the families' access to material and symbolic resources, but also by other factors: area of residence, literacy levels and parents' professional occupation, educational styles, communication patterns and television supply.

<p style="text-align: center;">TABLE 1 THEMATIC CATEGORIES OF INTERVIEWS ANALYSIS</p>	
1. PLANNING OF DAILY FAMILY LIFE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Daily activities of the families: work time / leisure - Preferred activities of the families / children - The management time of the families - Experiences of a social time: the evening
2. INTERACTION BETWEEN FAMILIES AND TELEVISION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Number and location of television sets - Timings and ways of watching television - What families most like and prefer on TV - What children most like and prefer on TV - The importance of television in the children's lives - Role and importance of television in family life - Social uses of television - The influence of television on children's learning
3. TELEVISION MEDIATION FORMS IN THE FAMALY	<p>3.1. Restrictive Mediation The parents implement rules concerning the children's television uses Examples: <i>prohibition of certain programmes</i></p> <p>3.2. Evaluative Mediation The parents and the children watch television together and talk about the programmes Examples: <i>discussion and interpretation of certain programmes</i> <i>explanation of the programme contents</i></p> <p>3.3. No Focalized Mediation Parents comment and ask the children about what they have been and are watching.</p>
4. FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE MEDIATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Family structure - children's 'characteristics' - Social use of the space - Time planning - Television accessibility
5. TYPES OF FAMILIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <u>Permissive Family</u> ("laissez-faire"): neither encourage nor set limits - <u>Restrictive Family</u>: set limits but not encourage - <u>Consensual Family</u>: encourage but not set limits - <u>Selective Family</u>: set limits as well as encourage

Some Conclusions

The analysis of data from the empirical research related to the television mediation processes developed by the families, revealed several aspects, as follows:

1. television experiences are variable and are related with daily practices. The relation between family and television is socially and culturally mediated by daily life;
2. children usually watch television programmes made for children (mostly alone or with siblings), but frequently watch other television programmes aimed at adult audiences (mostly with parents);
3. mainly, parents do not know what childhood programmes are nor do they watch these programmes with their children; as a consequence, there are only a few parents that mediate these kind of programmes. Usually children watch these programmes alone or with their siblings. In only a few situations, they watch these programmes with parents, in spite of frequently reynesting their presence. In the few cases where parents actively involve themselves with their children's television experiences, they try to comment and to talk about the programmes children are watching;
4. usually, children watch programmes for adult audiences with their parents. It is in this kind of programme that parents mediate somehow. When parents and children watch television, and when programmes are chosen by both, there is a larger possibility of dialogue, exchange of feelings, opinions, explanations, etc.;
5. parents identify 'Sesame Street' as an example of television's programmes from which children can learn. It is also the programme that parents mostly encourage their children to watch;
6. considering the three mediation forms analysed – restrictive, evaluative and no focalised – families more often show a tendency towards the first one. The data show us that parents adopt attitudes and practices of restriction. Generally speaking,

limits settled by parents depend more on programmes shown on TV (especially with violence and sex) than on the amount of time spent by children in front of the TV;

7. the no focalised (or indirect) mediation form is especially frequent during the time children watch television, but the influence that has stretches goes beyond these periods. This form of mediation obliges less implication, less involvement, and less intention from parents;
8. the evaluative form of mediation obliges active involvement from parents and occurs less frequently. This mediation form is not frequent and not all parents are aware or know its importance. However, we can find parents that talk about television programmes and comment on its contents with their children. These parents agree that their children learn more when they watch television with others or when they have the chance to talk about what they have watched;
9. children's television uses and preferences are almost the same of their parents and we believe that as Peters et al. (1991) concluded from their research, "*(...) families define the amount of time that children watch television, but also the kind of programmes and the quality of the television experience*";
10. as we considered before implementing our study, and as some other research concluded, the kind of mediation developed by parents influences the children's television uses;
11. the family structure, the organisation of home environment, the management of family time, the place where the TV set is, and its accessibility, influence and determine mediation processes developed by the families;

The analysis of the data also shows that the concepts of childhood and child that are shared by families influence the mediation processes. We can find three concepts of the child conceiving and using mediation:

- **Families that conceive children as active agents in social processes**, agents of their own development, owners of competencies, rights and specific characteristics. These families tend to adopt evaluative forms of mediation - they try to give satisfactory answers to children and not just an answer to keep them silent as happens in a large number of families. Parents challenge children questioning what they watch, asking them for their opinion about certain television programmes, believing in their answers in the context of their development and cognitive maturity. Children become selective and critical about what they watch, especially if they can rely on parents mediation. Parents also mention regularly other alternatives to television, for instance other activities that children can be occupied with.

- **Families that conceive childhood as a deficit**. They look at children not for what they can think, understand, or do, but for what they will be able to do in the future. This conception of childhood lead parents to delay explanations and comments and to leave answers to children's questions to the future, 'when children will be older'. These families, in which we can find restrictive mediation forms, try to avoid certain television programmes, especially involving violence and sex. They consider that these programmes are injurious to the harmonious development of children. They fear children's questions, their lack of understanding, their inexperience and credulity to comprehend the answers.

- **Families that conceive children as undefended human beings, easily influenced by television and very vulnerable**. Their only worry is to protect children from certain programmes' contents, because they can be a bad influence in the process of development and in the constitution of children's individuality. These families believe that children need to be protected from bad influences that television can develop. They usually adopt restrictive mediation forms that are mostly oriented to prohibition.

Final Considerations

We believe that it is important that mass media, especially television, follow ethical, deontological and legal rules for the appropriate development of their social functions.

However, the atmosphere of freedom and free competition in the area of mass media, as well as the need of rising viewing figures lead us to conclude about the need for parents and significant adults to mediate television programmes. Commenting on programmes contents can have a significant effect in the way children use and understand television.

In the development of our research, the relationship between children and television, their habits, preferences, watching forms, etc. were mentioned, analysed and qualified by adults, depending on their criteria. We believe that it would be interesting to listen to children, trying to discover how they comprehend television. If we wish to know if television makes sense to children, the pleasures, satisfactions, opinions and emotions to which it gives rise, it would be interesting to study television from children's points of view - listening to them, giving them the voice. This is the challenge that we face.

Bibliography

- BREDERODE SANTOS, Maria Emília, (1991), *Aprender com a Televisão: O Segredo do Rua Sésamo*, Lisboa: TV Guia Editora
- BRYCE, Jennifer W.; LEICHTER, Hope J. (1983), 'The Family and Television: Forms of Mediation', in *Journal of Family Issues*, vol.4 (2), pp.309-328
- BUCKINGHAM, David (1993), *Children Talking Television*, London: The Falmer Press
- BUCKINGHAM, David (1994), 'Television and the Definition of Childhood' in MAYALL, Berry (Ed.), *Children's Childhood Observed and Experienced*, London: The Falmer Press
- CHALVON, Mireille; Corset, Pierre; SOUCHON, Michel (1990), *L'Enfant Devant la Télévision des Années 90*, Paris: Casterman
- CHEVALIER, Eric; BANNEY, M.; MANSOUR, S. et al.. (1991), *La Relation Enfant-Television: Implications Physiques, Psychologiques, Educatives et Sociales*, Paris: Centre International de L'Enfance
- DESMOND, Roger J.; SINGER, J.; SINGER, D.; CALAM, R.; COLIMORE, K. (1985), 'Family Mediation Patterns and Television Viewing - Young Children's Use and Grasp of the Medium', in *Human Communication Research*, vol.11, nº4, pp.461-480
- DORR, Aimée (1986) *Television and Children: a Special Medium for a Special Audience*, London: Sage
- GUNTER, Barrie; SVENNEVIG, Michael (1987), *Behind and in Front of the Screen, Television's Involvement with Family Life*, London: John Libbey
- LAZAR, J. (s/d), *Escola, Comunicação, Televisão*, Lisboa: Rés Editora
- LINDLOF, Thomas; TRAUDT, Paul J., (1983), 'Mediated Communication in Families: New Theoretical Approaches', in MANDER, Mary S. (ed.), *Communications in Transition - Issues and Debates in Current Research*, New York: Praeger Publishers
- LULL, James (1990b), *Inside Family Viewing - Ethnographic Research on Television's Audience*, London: Routledge
- LULL, James (ed.) (1988), *World Families Watch Television*, Sage: Newbury Park
- MARIET, François (1989), *Laissez-les Regarder la Télé*, Paris: Calmann Lévy

- MORLEY, David (1986), *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*, London: Comedia
- PINTO, Manuel (1995), *A Televisão no Quotidiano das Crianças*, Tese de Doutoramento em Ciências da Comunicação, Braga: Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade do Minho
- ROGOFF, Barbara, (1993), *Aprendices del Pensamiento*, Barcelona: Paidós (edição inglesa de 1990)
- SCHRAMM, W.; LYLE, J.; PARKER, E. (1965), *Television para los niños*, Barcelona: Editorial Hispano-Europea (edição original americana de 1961)
- SILVERSTONE; Roger (1994), *Television and Everyday Life*, London: Routledge
- ST. PETERS, Michelle; FITCH; Marguerite, HUSTON, Aletha C.; Wright, John C.; EAKINS, Darwin J. (1991), 'Television and Families: What do Young Children Watch with their Parents?', in *Child Development*, nº 62, pp. 1409-1423
- WEAVER, Barry; BARBOUR, Nancy (1992), 'Mediation of Children's televiewing', in *Families in Society; The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, vol. 73